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SUBJECT: FERGHANA VALLEY COTTON HARVEST IN FULL SWING

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Classified By: POLOFFS RICHARD FITZMAURICE AND STEVEN PROHASKA FOR REAS
ONS 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary: The cotton harvest is in full swing in the Ferghana Valley. A deputy hokim (mayor) in the Ferghana town of Oltiaryq told poloffs on September 12 that he expected the cotton harvest in his region to exceed the previous two years. However, despite the deputy hokim's rosy outlook, the Government projects lower raw cotton yields this year and independent websites report that Uzbek laborers are heading to Kazakhstan in droves to pick cotton. In addition, authorities are reportedly resorting to harsher tactics to elicit involuntary labor in the Ferghana Valley this year, including denying sick-vouchers to college students and forming special labor detachments in Andijon province. Taken together, these developments point to increasing difficulties in a vital sector of the Uzbek economy. End summary.

FERGHANA VALLEY COTTON HARVEST IN FULL SWING...

¶2. (C) This year's cotton harvest is already in full swing in the Ferghana Valley. During a recent visit on September 12-13, poloffs observed many instances of farmers busily picking cotton in vast fields stretching toward the horizon. During an impromptu visit of the Oltiaryq region hokimyat (city hall), a deputy hokim (mayor) told poloffs that the cotton harvest in Oltiaryq began around September 1 and will be finished by the end of September. He said that the cotton harvest in Oltiaryq is expected to be higher this year than during the last two years, noting a particularly bad harvest two years ago.

...BUT COTTON YIELDS PROJECTED TO BE LOWER THIS YEAR

¶3. (U) In a September 17 article, Reuters reported that in February, the Uzbek government forecasted this year's cotton harvest at 3.6 million tons, lower than the 3.63 million tons collected in 2006. Noting that Foreign Investment and Trade Minister Elyor Ganiyev said at Tashkent's Fourth International Cotton and Textile Conference on September 17 that Uzbekistan's cotton fiber production would fall this year to 1 million tons from 1.17 million tons in 2006, Global Insight Daily Analysis projected that Uzbekistan's raw cotton yield would be lower this year as well. According to Embassy FSN who attended the Conference, Ganiyev did not explain why Uzbekistan's cotton fiber production would be less this year, but Embassy FSN speculated that a lower raw cotton harvest and poor weather were to blame.

14. (U) In a September 7 article in the Almaty-based "Delovaya Nedelya" ("Working Week") newspaper, journalist Andrey Saidov reported that "masses" of local Uzbeks are rushing to cotton fields in southern Kazakhstan to pick cotton because they are paid much higher there than in Uzbekistan. He noted cotton pickers in Uzbekistan can expect to earn 5 dollars a day, or between 150 to 200 dollars a season. (Note: On September 14, the independent Ferghana.ru website estimated that Uzbek cotton-pickers earn 63 dollars a month). In addition, Uznews.net reported on September 12 incidents of cotton being smuggled to Kyrgyzstan, which pays up to 1,000 soums (.80 dollars) per kilogram of cotton, as opposed to only between 53 to 71 soums (between .04 and .06 dollars) per kilogram in Uzbekistan.

COTTON HARVEST STILL RELIES ON "TRADITIONAL" MEANS...

15. (C) As long reported by post and other observers, authorities in Uzbekistan's provinces frequently rely on involuntary labor from public and private enterprises to pick cotton each year. The large-scale compulsory mobilization of youth and students to help with the cotton harvest during the fall--a practice that dates back to the Soviet era--continues in many rural regions. This year appears to be no exception, with multiple Embassy contacts and press sources reporting that vocational college-age students (15 to 18 years of age) have already been rounded up to pick cotton.

...BUT NO SICK-VOUCHERS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS THIS YEAR

16. (U) One apparent difference this year is that authorities in the Ferghana Valley reportedly have cracked down harder on

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dodging and have refused to issue sick-vouchers to college students. On September 14, Ferghana.ru reported that students of local colleges and universities in Andijon province have already been ferried to cotton fields. The article quotes some of the students, who claim that the rounding up of students is carried out by the National Security Service, which takes photographs of each of the students to prevent dodging. In addition, the article reported that, in contrast to previous years, medical facilities are refusing to issue students sick-vouchers to help them avoid cotton picking. On September 17, Uznews.net reported that even students who are genuinely ill with hepatitis have been denied sick-vouchers this year.

17. (C) While in Namangan, poloffs met a Future Leaders Exchange Program (FLEX) alumna who is currently attending a local college. She reported that local authorities force local institute and college students, who are between 15 to 18 years old, to pick cotton up to a month each year. The alumna said that she was able to procure sick-vouchers the last two years to avoid picking cotton, but she feared that she would not be able to secure a sick-voucher this year. She added that authorities refrain from using secondary school students to pick cotton, but do utilize secondary school teachers. As a result, students still miss lessons during cotton season due to the lack of teachers. While driving past a college in Ferghana City, poloffs noticed students being loaded on to several buses with mattresses and other supplies tied to the top--a clear sign that the students were being rounded up to pick cotton.

18. (C) During their meeting at the Oltiaryq hokimyat, the deputy hokim denied forcing college students to pick cotton and told poloffs that farmers find their own labor, usually hiring between ten to two hundred persons depending on the size of their land. However, he added that the hokimyat was already drawing up plans to utilize college students "just in

case" the cotton season extended into October and extra labor was needed.

SPECIAL LABOR DETACHMENTS REPORTEDLY FORMED IN ANDIJON

¶9. (U) Noting that Andijon province only met 86 percent of its cotton quota last year, Ferghana.ru reported on September 14 that authorities there have created special field-labor detachments this year. According to the article, each of the detachments will include at least 150 cotton-pickers, as well as policemen and prosecutors to oversee the operation.

¶10. (C) Free Farmers Party leader Nigara Khidoyatova told poloff on September 20 that a member of her organization who lives in Andijon, Dilshod (strictly protect), confirmed that special detachments had been formed and that authorities were refusing to grant sick-vouchers to anyone. Dilshod also reportedly told Khidoyatova that the number of women working in the fields is greater than in previous years, as low-income mothers have been threatened with the loss of their social security payments of 17,000 soums (13 dollars) per child unless they participate in the cotton harvest.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Officials projections for lower cotton harvests, together with reports that laborers are opting for higher-paying work in neighboring Kazakhstan and authorities are resorting to harsher tactics to elicit involuntary labor in the Ferghana Valley, point to increasing difficulties in this vital sector of the Uzbek economy.

NORLAND